

# Stories from the Field:

## Cultivating relationships through administrator actions

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### About TransformEd's Series on Fostering Strong Relationships

Transforming Education has developed the [SEL Integration Approach](#) to guide classroom educators in how to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) into academic curriculum and daily classroom routines through six key components. One of the foundational components in our approach is *Strong Relationships: Intentionally building connections with students, having a personal regard for them as individuals, and facilitating meaningful peer interactions*. In order to further understand what educators can do - and are doing - to build strong relationships, TransformEd has produced a [series of briefs](#) or “stories from the field” that are intended to share student and educator perspectives about developing and sustaining strong relationships within the classroom and throughout the school.

These briefs emerged after a series of visits to school campuses across the country in which students reported having strong social-emotional skills and favorable perceptions of the school environment. The goal of these visits was to learn directly from students, teachers, and administrators about the practices and supports being implemented that may be leading to more favorable school culture and stronger student social-emotional competencies and mindsets. In this series, we draw from what we learned about fostering strong relationships through our conversations and on-site observations at these schools. These briefs are grounded in student, teacher, and leader voice; present the latest research on the importance of building strong connections in the classroom and school; and provide additional resources that school teachers and leaders can easily implement in their schools to foster stronger relationships with students, among students, and with staff.

**This third and final brief focuses on ways school leaders can cultivate positive relationships with and among school staff. In it, we discuss the research on the importance of strong staff relationships, the perspectives and strategies used by leaders in the schools we visited, and evidence-based best practices for building collegial and trusting staff relationships.**

## Why do school leader and staff relationships matter?

A key factor in creating an environment conducive to student academic growth and social-emotional development is the cultivation of positive relationships between school leaders and staff.<sup>1,2,3</sup> The presence of positive and trusting staff relationships can improve student outcomes through several mechanisms. First, it can enable the conditions for teachers to further develop their teaching skills and practice.<sup>4</sup> When school leaders prioritize creating a culture of positive adult interactions, it allows teachers to feel part of a larger team, where each adult has the responsibility to support all students and feel supported by their colleagues.<sup>5,6</sup> This, in turn, can help teachers feel comfortable observing one another, discussing their practice, sharing knowledge, asking for and receiving feedback, and raising concerns.<sup>7</sup> It can also empower teachers to try innovative strategies in their classroom and to express dissenting views.<sup>8</sup> Each of these factors is necessary for teachers to hone their craft.

Second, fostering an environment where school staff have strong relationships with one another can also mitigate factors that lead to teacher turnover.<sup>9</sup> Teacher turnover has a negative effect on student achievement, since high-turnover schools often replace more experienced teachers with less experienced teachers.<sup>10</sup> Teacher turnover is often highest in under-resourced schools, which serve predominately students of color and low-income communities.<sup>11</sup> The reasons for teacher turnover vary; however, many teachers report leaving due to lack of administrative support or poor working conditions.<sup>12</sup> As such, cultivating an environment where all teachers feel supported and trusted through strong relationships among school staff can reduce issues that may lead to burnout and frequent turnover within a school.

Finally, establishing a culture of caring and trusting relationships among and between leaders and school staff can ensure that the adults in the school are modeling for students what strong and positive relationships look like. In the [second brief](#) in our *Fostering Strong Relationships* series, we discussed the importance of fostering positive peer relationships by ensuring adults in the school are modeling what positive interactions look like with other educators.<sup>13</sup> When students see their leaders and teachers engaging in warm and trusting relationships with each other, they are more likely to engage in those same types of interactions with their peers. Roland S. Barth, Founding Director of the Principals' Center at Harvard University and a former school administrator, wrote, "If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, then the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative."<sup>14</sup>

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ROLAND S. BARTH

Prioritizing positive staff relationships can enable principals to create a school environment in which teachers feel respected and heard, receptive to critical feedback, and focused on striving for growth. School leaders can foster greater collegiality in their schools through several mechanisms, including modeling collegiality in their interactions with other educators and staff; putting systems and structures in place to encourage formal and informal relationship-building; being explicit in their expectations that all interactions among and between teachers and students come from a place of respect; and rewarding positive interactions through recognition and leadership opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

The next two sections of this brief offer insights from leaders about their experiences in building positive staff relationships and highlight additional promising practices that leaders can use to foster collegial and trusting relationships with and among school staff.

## What do school leaders say about building strong relationships with school staff?

In seeking to learn more about what makes a learning environment conducive to positive social-emotional development, we identified six school campuses across the country in which students reported having strong social-emotional skills, a strong sense of belonging, and strong connections with their teachers. One of the predominant themes that emerged from our interviews with administrators at these schools was their intentional prioritization of building strong relationships with their staff. As one administrator noted, “**success to me would be when you walk into schools, you can sense the culture even before you interact with anyone...where teachers feel valued, and supported, and empowered.**”

**Setting the tone and allocating time for relationship-building can create an environment that cultivates trust.**

The administrators we spoke to allocated time inside and outside of the school day to strengthen relationships with staff. One principal shared, “**When teachers are stressed out, then we'll have conversations about [it]: ‘I couldn't sleep last night because I was up thinking about da-da-da-da-da.’ And I say, ‘It happens to me too, so here are the three things that I do that can usually help me go back to sleep. What do you do to help yourself try to go back to sleep?’ Just sharing that personal piece of how I do it in my personal life as well as my professional life with them too is helpful.**” When leaders provide a window for open dialogue where teachers can

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**It's just how you treat people. As an adult and as a leader, you have to model those things. I mean, that's what it all comes down to is behavior... You can talk until you're blue in the face, but [you need to] model and scaffold exactly what you would like to see... that is probably the most beneficial and impactful thing.**

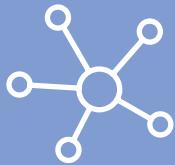
discuss stressful issues, and when leaders demonstrate empathy by sharing their personal stories, it can help strengthen relationships with staff while also gaining insight into what specific stressors teachers are experiencing that might require additional support.

In some cases, administrators found that creating a less formal atmosphere helped staff feel more connected to one another. As one principal of an elementary school noted, “[here \[we’re\] not as formal. For example, I come to work, and my coworkers call me by my first name . . . It’s very relatable.](#)” In other cases, administrators organized time outside of the school day, such as with monthly potluck lunches or dinners, to allow staff and administrators to learn about one another in less formal structures. In addition to demonstrating an investment of time and interest in staff, this kind of gathering also opens up a space for meaningful conversations and informal information sharing.

**Administrators we spoke with described the importance of engaging with teachers using the same relationship-building strategies they expect teachers to use with students.**

Several school leaders reported engaging in activities with their staff that they ask their staff to engage in with students when building teacher-student relationships. One example of this is “circles”, where space is created for teachers to share positive reflections, as well as important challenges or issues they might be facing.<sup>16</sup> One leader noted that this technique can support strong staff morale, especially when done consistently and when it includes recognition of the school, teachers, and students.

Another assistant principal talked about the importance of engaging school staff in mindfulness techniques that teachers use with students, in order to create more positive interactions among school staff. She said, “[We’ll do \[mindfulness techniques\] during workdays together as a whole staff, we’ll do them during faculty meetings whenever the whole group is together and we’ve either talked about something intense. Or, we might be modeling, “this is what you do,” but then we talk about how it affected us and brought us to a more positive place.](#)”



## SEL CONNECTIONS

When administrators ask teachers to engage in the same activities that teachers ask students to engage in, it can help teachers more deeply understand students' perspectives when participating in those activities. Social perspective-taking is a key skill in fostering positive relationships and can be used to strengthen teacher-student relationships. More information on strategies for building teacher-student relationships can be found in this companion brief.

### What strategies can school leaders integrate into their daily work to build stronger relationships with and among school staff?

In this section, we recommend strategies for administrators to implement in the school to build and sustain strong relationships with and among school staff. This list is by no means exhaustive; the strategies described are ones that we've observed in our partner schools, that align with research on best practices, and that can be integrated seamlessly into school systems and structures.

#### USE SURVEYS TO LEARN ABOUT YOUR STAFF AND GATHER THEIR PERSPECTIVES

Just as teachers can use surveys to get to know their students better, school leaders can use surveys to get to know their staff better, on a professional and personal level, and gather feedback based on staff perceptions.<sup>17</sup> Getting-to-know-you surveys can be administered in the beginning of the year, and include questions to understand school staff better as professionals, such as:

- *Why do you teach?*
- *What are you nervous about in the upcoming school year?*
- *What can you help others with?*
- *How do you prefer to receive feedback?*

as well as questions to get to know the staff better as individuals, such as:

- *What do you like to do in your spare time?*
- *What's one thing you're proud of?*
- *What's one tradition from your family or community that is particularly meaningful to you?*

Surveys, [like this one from Panorama Education](#), can be administered bi-annually to gather teacher and staff perspectives on important topics like school leadership, school culture and climate, and leadership-staff relationships.

Time should be allocated to reviewing and discussing results from the surveys with school staff. School leaders should incorporate what they've learned about their staff into interactions and celebrations of school staff, which demonstrates caring, an important component of building trust.<sup>18</sup> Results should also be incorporated into leaders' decision-making processes, which can strengthen relationships with staff by demonstrating that they are valued as professionals with important insights and perspectives.<sup>19</sup>

## DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE IMPORTANCE OF TEAM-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Creating a collegial team requires intentionality and consistency.<sup>20</sup> One way to do this is to incorporate team-building activities into every staff meeting. Oakland Unified School District has created the [3 Signature SEL Practices](#) for staff meetings, which includes guidance on facilitating a Welcoming Ritual, Engaging Practices, and Optimistic Closure during team meetings. Another resource is [The Team Handbook](#), which contains tools and resources to help teams work well together, including affinity diagrams, prioritization matrices, and effort/impact grids. A list of common team-building activities for school staff can be found [here](#).

## PARTICIPATE IN STAFF DUTIES

When school administrators engage directly in the day-to-day activities of school staff members, it can support the development of strong relationships between leaders and staff.<sup>21</sup> This can include attending students' home visits with teachers, taking part in an afterschool club or sport, or helping out with lunch duty. It is important to keep these activities separate from formal evaluation processes to maintain a focus on understanding, honoring, and supporting school staff. By taking on the responsibilities of staff members, school leaders can begin to more deeply understand the work of their staff and build relationships through social perspective-taking.<sup>22</sup>

## BE CLEAR WITH EXPECTATIONS AND INTENTIONS

When new policies are implemented or requests are made of school staff, it is important that the staff members understand why a request matters and that they trust that they will be supported in implementing the policy or fulfilling the request.<sup>23</sup> As much as possible, administrators should be clear about the what, how, and why of their expectations of teachers. Before creating a new school policy, leaders should ask themselves:

- *What do I expect my staff to do and what resources do they need to do it?*
- *Who is impacted by this policy and how?*
- *Why is this important for our community?*

Leaders should then communicate this information to staff during the implementation of the new policy and be responsive to any needs or concerns that may arise.

## What have we learned?

When school leaders establish a culture of trusting relationships, it can build and reinforce the conditions in which teachers are able to hone their practice, which will in turn support students' academic and social-emotional development. Establishing strong relationships with and among school staff can improve teacher morale and help mitigate those factors that lead to teacher burnout and, ultimately, teacher turnover. In our conversations with schools across the country, we heard from current school leaders and staff that when leaders allocate time to get to know staff as whole people, and when they model some of the same relationship-building strategies with staff that they expect staff members to use with students, they are able to intentionally cultivate an environment of collegiality and trust with school staff. Establishing strong, supportive relationships with and among staff can ultimately help create an environment in which all members of the school community can thrive.

### Additional Resources to Explore

- [Building Trusting Relationships for School Improvement: Implications for Principals and Teachers](#) by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Provides multiple strategies and activities that school leaders can adapt to build trust with and among teachers.
- [Collaborative Leadership for Thriving Teams: A Guide for Teacher-Powered Site Administrators](#) by Education Evolving. A guide geared to site administrators working at, creating, or converting to a teacher-powered governance model at their school. Provides reflection questions, team conversation starters, troubleshooting advice, and tips and tricks that can be relevant to or adapted for all governance models to support the development of trusting, collegial relationships between and among teachers and administrators.
- [School Leadership: Resource Roundup](#) by Edutopia. For school administrators, this list of videos, blogs, and articles includes advice and tips on effective leadership strategies, partnering with teachers, and cultivating and retaining strong leaders.
- [Teacher-Principal Relationships: Are We Building Bridges or Burning Them?](#) by Peter DeWitt. Offers strategies that school leaders and teachers can use to build bridges with one another and suggests a shift from divisive language that separates the work of teachers from that of principals.
- [Building Positive Relationships with Fellow Educators](#) by Chad Donohue. Offers several ideas that school staff can implement to develop a positive adult culture in their school. Share some of these with your staff, and provide the time, space, and resources so they can act on the ones that feel right for your school community.

Learn more about the importance of strong relationships and other key components for fostering optimal social-emotional learning (SEL) with Transforming Education's SEL Integration Approach by clicking [here](#).

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